Grand Theft Auto V: Exploring Misogyny in Games

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The official GTA Website describes GTA V as an intense journey involving three characters: the young street hustler Franklin, the retired bank robber Michael, and the terrifying psychopath Trevor. The characters find

themselves entangled in some of the most frightening and deranged elements of the criminal underworld, the U.S. government, and the entertainment industry, in the ruthless city of Los Santos (Rockstar Games).

Amongst game fanatics, the game is incredibly popular as a result of its non-linear approach, open discoverability, and most importantly, its active modding community, fostering a sense of belongingness for its players. However, despite its acclaim, GTA V has met with a lot of criticism, particularly regarding its portrayal of women. While critics have praised the game for its innovative approach to narration, pushing creative and artistic boundaries, they have also expressed disappointment in Rockstar's lack of interest in portraying women as anything but "lustful airheads".

Interestingly enough, the game's predominantly male fanbase has been quick to defend the game against such criticism, without acknowledging its real-world implications. This not only sends a very damaging message to its players but also perpetuates the harmful stereotypes about women, as depicted in the game. However, addressing the issue of women's representation in GTA V goes beyond just criticising one game; it highlights a broader systemic problem within the gaming industry. **Hence, by analysing GTA V's misogynistic elements in its gameplay, examining the role of its audience, and reflecting on the gaming industry's overall shortcomings, this paper aims to shed light on such deep-rooted issues.**

Gameplay

GTA V allows players to step into the shoes of the three main characters: Michael, Trevor, and Franklin, all male leads. It allows its players to shoot and drive away from enemies or escape the cops. The game's world is filled with diverse NPCs, including pedestrians, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, construction workers and more, creating a vibrant setting in the city of Los Santos. Moreover, the game excels in simulating the intricate details of the city with the exact street names, or landmarks. However, this innovative and well-crafted world significantly fails in one regard.

To explain further, the game tends to undertake a very traditional approach when it comes to incorporating female characters into its storyline. Within the GTA V universe, female characters are usually limited to inconsequential supporting roles, as they rarely get in the way of the lead players or challenge them with obstacles. Even when female characters do take part in missions, they often assume passive roles, needing rescue from our protagonists. A prime example of this is seen, early on in the game, when the player is tasked with rescuing Michael's daughter, against her will, from a

porn shoot (Gonzalez & Gonzalez, 2016). This pattern of relegating female characters to damsels in distress perpetuates the notion that women are secondary to the male leads, contributing to the game's overall misogynistic undertones.

Moreover, amongst the female NPCs, it becomes apparent that they are severely underrepresented in various professions. Regrettably, the game seems to limit their roles to primarily stereotypical and hypersexualized occupations, such as strippers, hookers, and prostitutes. The female characters within the main plot of GTA V, who are either relatives or acquaintances of the protagonists, are often depicted in negative and stereotypical ways. They are portrayed as bothersome, annoying, unfaithful, and prone to self-destructive behaviour. For example, the first time we meet Franklin's aunt, she yells at him for being a freeloader. The first time we meet Trevor's neighbour, she's cheating on her boyfriend by offering oral sex to Trevor in exchange for heroin. Similarly, in Michael's life, his wife, an ex-stripper, is shown as someone who constantly screams at her husband, and engages in infidelity. His daughter, too, is portrayed as a shallow character as she obsesses over a reality show called, "Shame or Fame." (Tassi, 2013).

One possible justification for the portrayal of such female characters could be attributed to the game's overall reliance on terrible stereotypes for all of its characters, regardless of gender. Both male and female side-characters are depicted as shallow and eccentric. Even the three lead characters, Michael, Trevor and Franklin, are portrayed as deeply flawed individuals with questionable moralities. However, the core issue lies in the stark contrast between the development of the male lead characters and the lack of a well-rounded female character in the game. Despite all the lead characters being mass murderers, they are given ample screen time and opportunities to evolve into complex and multi-dimensional individuals. However, the absence of a female lead character means that there is no chance for a female character to be portrayed as morally ambiguous yet likeable, as seen with her male counterparts (Tassi, 2013).

Hence, the missed opportunity to explore the potential of a female lead character in the game, limits its narrative scope and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes through its one-dimensional portrayal of women. Such instances reflect Rockstar Games' poor decision to undertake a "misogynistic" approach in their gameplay.

Audience

Now, GTA V's game mechanics are undeniably thrilling, exciting, and innovative, which is why it has been quite successful in garnering widespread popularity amongst its predominantly male players. However, in order to explore misogynistic patterns within the game, it is essential for us to delve deeper into the response of GTA V's audience to such criticism, and the game's impact on them.

To elaborate, in recent times, an unfortunate feedback loop has emerged, where the game's fanbase has become hypersensitive to any form of critique. They tend to constantly avoid any discussions regarding the game's shortcomings as they display a lack of willingness to accept that the game is mature enough to be subjected to critical analysis. For example, when Carolyn Petit from GameStop called GTA V, "politically muddled and profoundly misogynistic" (Petit, 2014), she faced severe backlash. More than 20,000 comments dismissed her reviews solely based on her gender, despite her rating for the game being nine of ten (Lewis, 2013). In fact, in my opinion, I find it quite ironic that the fanbase often uses the term "snowflakes" to dismiss such critics, while they themselves seem to be hypersensitive to any form of criticism directed towards the game.

However, the more disturbing aspect lies in how the game appeals to certain individuals within its audience. Prior to GTA V's release, a disturbing forum post went viral, expressing a desire to commit heinous acts of violence against women. It read, "I want to have the opportunity to kidnap a woman, hostage her, put her in my basement and rape her every day, listen to her crying, watching her tears" (Lewis, 2013). Now, violence within GTA V is part of the gameplay experience however, it becomes incredibly concerning when it begins to serve as an outlet for people who are inclined towards committing violent acts against women.

In addition to this, it is important for us to realise that the game is notoriously popular amongst teenagers despite its target audience being adults. As a result, this poses a significant risk on such impressionable minds as they can negatively perceive the game due to its tendency to hypersexualise women. A distressing example of this occurred when a 12 year-old-boy in the UK attempted to reenact a supposed “rape” scene from the game on his own younger sister (Lumley & Kelly-Ann-Mills, 2019). Weirdly enough, Rockstar stated that this scene was supposed to portray “cannibalism” and not “rape” (Grandoni, 2014)!

So, to summarise, GTA V has got a large male audience. Hence, its defensive fanbase, appeal to individuals with violent tendencies and popularity amongst young teenagers definitely raises some red flags. It further demonstrates how the representation of females in such widely popular games can cause a huge negative impact. Therefore, as a solution, the audience of such games must realise how important it is to embrace open

dialogue and critical assessment to improve the future of the gaming community.

Industry

In terms of the entire gaming industry, GTA V had a relatively booming financial success, gaining $800 million from around the world upon its initial release (Sydell, 2013). It also received 7 awards, including Game of the year at the VGX awards (Gonzalez & Gonzalez, 2016). The game's success highlights the game's appeal, especially amongst its significant male audience. The reason behind this, is that it embraces a hyper-masculine narrative and strategically caters to the male gaze. It is able to achieve this by overly objectifying women, which can be demonstrated through its loading screen alone; and stereotypically portraying male characters in aggressive and violent roles, making it quite enjoyable for its male audience. In fact, the most popular Google searches related to GTA V inquire about features like strip clubs, girlfriends, and how one could take a girl home and perform sexual activities with them.

Unfortunately, the game's success has not only incentivised game creators to continue producing content that caters to such an audience, but has also made them hesitant about deviating from such a profitable formula. As a result, this trend has raised several questions about the current state of the gaming industry and their portrayal of gender as a whole. For instance,

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49% of female avatars are portrayed with disproportionately large breasts or Burgess (Chen, 2021). Such statistics reveal that most video games predominantly view the world through the lens of a heterosexual man. But why is that the case?

According to the former head of IGDA, Kate Edwards, gender disparity in software engineers likely results in gaming content that appeals primarily to the masculine sight (Chen, 2021). As women only account for 30% of all developers, according to the 2021 IGDA Summary Report (*Developer*

satisfaction survey: Summary report [2021] 2021), the gender disparity is inarguably evident. In fact, such disparities not only impacts women's representation in video games but also the women working within the industry. Their work is dismissed, their opinions are ignored, and in some cases, they even face harassment. Anita Sarkeesian, for example, wanted to shed light on sexism in games and began her crowdfunding campaign to produce a web series about female characters. However, she met with a disturbing internet hate campaign (Lewis, 2013). So what needs to change?

In my opinion, it is time for large gaming companies such as Rockstar Games, to recognize its influential role in shaping culture and society and strive for content that is balanced, respectful, and inclusive. In fact, moving forward, the gaming industry as a whole, must take a stand against such disparities and acknowledge their impact on diverse representation, further fostering connections with players from all walks of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, GTA V is a well-received game, but its misogynistic elements cannot be ignored. The game's failure to provide meaningful representation of women, its objectification of female characters, and the hostile response from the fanbase to gender stereotype criticism are all concerning issues that Rockstar Games must confront. However, these problems are not exclusive to a single gaming company; they are widespread within the industry. The gaming industry as a whole must take responsibility for promoting a more inclusive and diverse gaming experience. By doing so, the industry can not only continue to be profitable but also become a platform that celebrates diversity and empowers all players, regardless of gender, identity, or background. It is time for the industry to step up and create an

environment where everyone can feel represented and respected in the gaming world.

Until then, let's wait to see if GTA VI seizes the opportunity to learn from its predecessor and brings forth the awaited changes we've all been hoping for!

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The paper was co-created using ChatGPT. The use of ChatGPT was mostly avoided while writing the main content of the paper but was used to write more effective conclusions. The initial responses produced by ChatGPT, when prompted to write a concluding statement for each supporting claim, were not very helpful. It was simply able to provide a rough outline which served as a good starting point for the author. However, the author had to make additional efforts to connect everything, and sometimes rewrite portions from scratch to ensure coherence.

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chat gpt is a liar. .

this is pretty bad. at least you're upfront with your use of it.

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V VolkColopatrion You
54 mins ago

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VolkColopatrion You
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the people that called this game misogynist are not only clutching the perls over fiction. just like the religious right does today... they... more

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VolkColopatrion You
1 hour ago (edited)

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this is some revisionist... more

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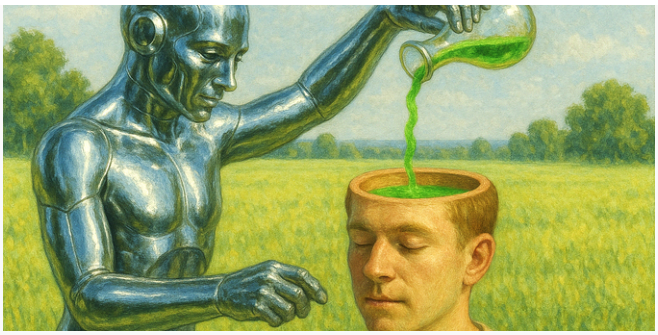

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